DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 802 FL 024 129

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TITLE A Study of Verbal Interaction in Discussion Groups in a Writing Class.
PUB DATE 22 Apr 96
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Center Seminar (31st, April 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; College Students; Critical Thinking; Discourse Analysis; *Discussion Groups; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication; Language Patterns; Language Usage; Majors (Students); *Peer Evaluation; Persuasive Discourse; Revision (Written Composition); Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; Thinking Skills; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Consensus; Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Observation of 16 university students of writing in English as a Second Language in Taiwan focused on the nature of interactions during three peer response sessions and one consensus exercise. It examined the kinds of comments made by a writing group in responding to peer writing and the characteristics of the verbal interaction in a consensus exercise. Peer response was used in this context to revise compositions, and consensus exercises to cultivate negotiation and critical thinking skills. Analysis of audiotape recordings of the interactions over two months showed that the students tended to restate the ideas in their peers' writing half of the time, and only one-third of the time were able to challenge or make suggestions to others. There were few evaluative statements, suggesting inability or reluctance to critique peers' work. During the consensus exercise, students showed substantial lack of skills needed to negotiate and synthesize ideas. Deficient in critical thinking skills, they were unable to present arguments with support. Contains 25 references. (Author/MSE)

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ED 399 802

A Study of verbal Interaction in discussion groups in a writing class

Paper presented at 1996 SAMEO RELC Regional Seminar

April 22, 1996

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the nature of students' verbal exchanges at three peer response sessions and one consensus exercise. The research questions were: (1) What kinds of comments does a writing group make when they respond to peers' writing at peer response sessions? What is the quality of their comments? (2) What characterizes the verbal interaction of a consensus exercise held by a writing group? The participants were 16 English majors enrolled in a Composition and Oral Training class for sophomores at a university in Taiwan. In this class peer response was used to help revise research papers and consensus exercises were used to cultivate negotiation and critical thinking skills. The researcher observed the class for two months and audio-taperecorded four group activities. The analysis of the tapes showed that the students restated the ideas in their peers' writing half of the time. In only one third of the time the students were able to challenge or make suggestions to others. There were also very few evaluative statements, indicating the students' inability or reluctance to critique peers' work. During the consensus exercise, the students showed a severe lack in the skills needed to negotiate and synthesize ideas. Deficient in critical thinking skills, they were hardly able to present arguments with support.

Introduction

Since cooperative learning was advocated (e.g., by Slavin 1990), the efficacy of peer response as a way to help students revise compositions has been an issue of interest for many teachers and scholars in both the first (L1) and second/foreign language (L2) contexts. Many classrooms are using peer response to provide multiple audiences, build up a community of writers for students' mutual support, and ease the teacher's burden of responding to students' texts in their drafting stage. Some teachers in Taiwan have begun doing the same. However, whether students know how to proceed in peer response sessions or make effective comments remains a debatable issue. It is particularly controversial in the L2 context since L2 learners are often still struggling with the language they are learning and therefore may not be able to critique writing effectively.

This potential limitation can carry over to other areas as well. The same skills required for peer response, such as analyzing problems critically, presenting views with supporting arguments, and negotiating with peers, are often needed in other group activities that require students to collaborate. An example of such an activity is a consensus exercise, in which the students learn to negotiate with each other to reach agreement on some particular topic. Many teachers and scholars (e.g., Tebo-Messina, 1987/1988) also have doubts about whether students can interact successfully in such an activity.

The debate on the value of peer response continues, however, little research has been directed specifically at Chinese EFL learners and how they function in peer response sessions and consensus exercises. The purpose of this study is to examine their performance in three peer response sessions and one consensus exercise. It is hoped that this study will provide teachers in Taiwan with a better understanding of the learning processes these learners experience in these activities. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of comments does a writing group make when they respond to peers' writing at peer response sessions? What is the quality of their comments?

2. What characterizes the verbal interaction of a consensus exercise held by a writing group?

Review of the literature

In recent years, writing teachers have experimented with writing groups as a means of helping students to write. The underlying theory can be attributed to the social origin concept of learning, as advocated by Vygotsky (1978), who believed that interaction with others is central to learning. Since then, many

scholars have investigated how students function in peer response groups.

Nature of Group Talk

Some studies examined the nature of the conversation in peer response groups and categorized the conversation into several types. In the L1 context, Liner (1984) presented six types of talk among high school students: structuring talk (language used to move the group discussion along); joking; explanation about the writing; statements concerning the experience written about; opinion about the writing; and technical editing. When discussing texts, the students produced six kinds of talk: questions; praise; criticism; suggestions; expansion on the subject; and other responses. David's study (1986) of college writers identified four types of discourse: response to the writing; talk to establish the atmosphere for group work; talk to move the group along; and talk addressed to the researcher who would listen to the tape. Benesch (1985/1986) also identified four kinds of talk: sharing (acknowledging the writer's effort); mirroring (summarizing and paraphrasing the text in order to confirm the writer's intended meaning); responding (discussing the writing); and helping (offering suggestions for revision). In the L2 context, Stanley's (1992) and Huang's (1994) study of university ESL freshmen and EFL sophomores established categories similar to those mentioned above.

Efficacy of Group Talk

Researchers have also studied the potential of peer comments for facilitating revision. Some studies have shown that peer comments are helpful for revision. In the L1 context, Gere and Stevens (1985) concluded that 5th-, 8th-, and 12th-graders' comments, when compared with those of the teacher (which were standardized to the extent that they could be transposed from one text to another), were more specific to particular texts and more attentive to the writer's intended meaning. They were also richer and more varied. Danis (1980) showed that 90% of the comments made by college sophomores were accurate, and 60% of them would produce improvements if acted upon. Group talk has also been shown to be conducive to problem-solving. Nystrand's (1986) case studies of two college writing groups showed that students engaged in extensive collaborative problem-solving, ranging from searching for a word to jointly revising a troublesome paragraph. Their discussion ranged from general characterization of both the strengths and weaknesses of particular texts to detailed discussions about reworking problem sections.

In the L2 context, Partridge (1981) claimed that the responses of college ESL students were more at the learners' level of development or interest and were thus perceived as more

informative than the teacher's comments. Caulk (1994) showed that 85% of college ESL students made valid suggestions, and 60% of them brought up suggestions that their instructor had not thought of. Only 6% of the suggestions they made were judged invalid. Huang's study (1994) of EFL university sophomores also claimed that only 6% of the peer comments were problematic.

However, research also indicates that peer response sometimes fails as a result of students' lack of ability to critique writing. Some scholars have criticized peer feedback as a practice of "the blind leading the blind." Danis (1980, 1982) and Ziv (1983) showed that college students sometimes provided inaccurate advice or failed to suggest revisions.. Students, they claimed, lacked critical-thinking ability and were unable to analyze problems or synthesize ideas. Danis (1980, 1982), Flynn (1982), and Rothstein-Vandergriff and Gilson (1988) demonstrated that college students overlooked problems and spent too much time on minor weaknesses. Research also shows that students have difficulty reading the text analytically (Flynn, 1982; Rothstein-Vandergriff & Gilson, 1988) and fail to ask the writer for definition, restatement, or illustration (Danis, 1982). Ritchie (1983) showed that even if students could sense problems in the text, they might not have an adequate metalanguage to express their ideas. Graner (1987) mentioned that students may come to class unprepared or uncommitted, that is, they may not brought drafts for sharing with the group or may have written the drafts carelessly.

In addition, some groups may fail to interact successfully. Danis' (1980, 1982) study of college sophomores found that a group without a leader would drift away from the task. Danis (1980, 1982) and Spear (1988) both reported that students were often unsure of their roles and failed to maintain the group discussion. Flynn (1982) found that college students did not want to challenge their classmates. Danis' college sophomores (1980, 1982), Freedman's 9th-graders (1987), and Allaei and Connor's East Asian EFL college students (1990) were reluctant to make negative criticism. Spear (1988) believed that college students' concern about preserving harmony and their assumption that it is inappropriate to pass judgement on classmates' ideas could cause the group to fail. Interpersonal conflicts sometimes do arise. Tebo-Messina's (1987/1988) college freshmen became hostile over issues of leadership and composing styles. Nelson and Murphy's (1992) study of one ESL college writing group found that throughout the course the peer response sessions were dominated by one female student who attacked others' writing. Sometimes such attacks turned the sessions into duels and caused some members to withdraw from participation.

Stanley (1992) and Zhu (1995) both concluded that coaching students for peer response is very important if the quantity and quality of peer feedback are to be improved. Sommers and

Lawrence (1992) also strongly suggested the need to train students for any type of group task.

The above mixed findings suggest that whether writing groups can work effectively and how students actually perform in groups remains an area for research. Studies about Chinese EFL learners are particularly needed since few have been conducted. EFL teachers will be able to make informed pedagogical decisions if they learn more about writing groups.

Methods

The researcher observed the subjects of this study for a period of approximately two months, three hours per week.

Subjects and Setting

The subjects were English majors enrolled in a Composition and Oral Training course for sophomores at a university in Taiwan. This two-semester course aimed to increase students' writing and speaking proficiency by closely integrating these two elements. This class had 16 students. All of the subjects were experienced in group work, but only a few of them had had a small amount of experience with peer response. (The names used in this report are all pseudonyms.)

The students' first major writing task was a research project which was carried out in three stages. First, the students wrote up a theory on the cause of family conflicts. Next they developed an observation method to test the theory. Finally they analyzed the data they had collected. After each stage the students shared their writing in groups of three or four to receive peer feedback on useful revisions. The instructor prepared the students for this project by spending a few classes discussing general causes of family conflicts and providing guidelines for observation and data analysis.

Near the end of the researcher's observation, the instructor assigned a consensus exercise in which the students, in two groups of eight, were asked to collaboratively rank, according to importance, ten factors which could contribute to the successful revision of a piece of writing done by another person. The purpose of the exercise was to see how the students adopt procedural roles, how they handle disagreements, and how they attempt to persuade their classmates.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher audio-taperecorded the conversation of one group in each peer response session and one group in the consensus exercise. The groups in which Annie, one of the students in the class observed, participated were chosen since

this study was a by-product of a case study on her undertaken by the researcher at that time.

Analysis and Discussion

The discussion will be divided into two sections, one on the peer response sessions and the other on the consensus exercise.

Peer Response Sessions A, B, and C

In session A, the students, in groups of three or four, shared their theories on the causes of family conflicts. The students were required to ask the following questions when responding to their peers' theories: (1) How clear is the theory? (2) How complete is the theory? (3) How convincing is the theory? Are the assumptions reasonable? Is the theory on target?

In session B, the students were required to respond to their classmates' observation methods. They were instructed to ask the following questions: (1) How well does the method relate to the theory? (2) How clear are the instructions for the observer? Can the group members conduct the research on their own after hearing the instructions? (3) How complete is the paper?

In session C, the students shared their data analysis. The students were asked to comment on the clarity and completeness of the analysis, as well as its relevance to the theory and data. For this session, none of the students in the group observed by the researcher had brought a draft with them. One student left her draft at home, two did not carry out the observation, and one completed the observation but left the analysis undone.

For each session, the professor allotted the same amount of time, 15 minutes, but the actual duration of each varied. In order to give an idea of the amount of speech produced in the discussion of the texts at each session (with the reading of drafts excluded), the number of words exchanged was counted. The number of words produced in each of the four types of statements described below was also counted.

According to their functions, the statements made at the sessions were divided into four categories (these were a modification of those used by Benesch, 1985/1986): (1) restatement of the author's ideas (by the author or responders); (2) statements challenging the author's ideas or suggesting revisions; (3) evaluative statements assessing the author's ideas; and (4) procedural statements regarding how the session is to proceed. In the word count for a certain category, all the words produced in a series of exchanges between the author and the responder(s) to fulfill the function of that particular category were counted. For instance, for the number of words in

a statement of challenge, a responder's challenge and the author's reply were both counted.

The following table shows the length of time of each session, the total number of words produced in each session, and the percentages of the words produced under each category out of the total number of words said in each session.

Table 1
Types of Comments Produced at Peer Response Sessions: Quantity and Proportion

	Session A	Session B	Session C
Time	15 mins.	10 mins.	7 mins.
Total no. of words	1104	364	248
Types of statements (no. of words)			
Restatement of ideas	48% (528)	63% (228)	49% (122)
Challenge or suggestion	35% (384)	24% (89)	35% (86)
Procedural statement	5% (57)	10% (35)	10% (25)
Evaluative statement	12% (135)	3% (12)	6% (15)

The four types of statements are described below. In the following excerpts, the researcher's explanation or description of group interaction is enclosed with brackets []. An incomprehensible word is marked with (?), two such words with (??), and three or more with (???). Irrelevant text has been deleted in order to avoid distraction by unnecessary information. This is indicated by [del. text]. A pause is marked by ". . ." . Pe, Ja, An, Gr, Wa, Ju, and Je are the short forms for the students' names--Peggy, Jack, Annie, Greg, Walter, Judy, and Jennifer.

(1) Restatements of author's ideas

In all of the sessions, restatement of the author's ideas was the most frequent type of statement. In session A, this restating routine occurred after every author's sharing of the theory. At the end of this session, Jack and Peggy also asked the author to summarize his/her ideas to confirm their understanding. Through this, the author was able to see if his/her ideas had been successfully communicated. In the following example, both Peggy and Jack repeated Annie's theory in their own words.

> [After Annie's reading of her draft. Her theory: When children grow older, they form new ideas of their own. Therefore, the older they get, the more frequently family conflicts arise between them and their parents.]
> Pe: Okay, this is what I was thinking of getting from it. When a child gets older, they turn more toward their

friends. So they don't communicate as well with their parents than as in the past when they were more truthful. So constantly there is conflict. Age difference, and everything.

Ja: I have the same thing but_ Parent-child conflict and_ It results from new ideas and experimenting and peer pressure. I don't know how to express this. Say he rather plays with his friends than he would his Mom and Dad. And I can understand the generation gap. The solution . . . Things would be better when the children move out.

In session B, this restating routine occurred five times. Both Judy and Jack restated their own methods after sharing them. After hearing Jack's method, Judy restated twice, and Annie once, what they thought they understood. Their restatements caused Jack to question his method, which was a valuable realization for him.

In session C, none of the students had a draft with them, therefore their reports of the observations and analyses were often incomplete. Thus the authors, instead of retelling the content of their analyses to the responders, often provided details that were missing from their sketchy oral reports at the responders' request. (Such statements providing missing information were categorized as restatements of author's ideas since they were also intended to clarify the author's ideas.) Such restating routines occurred four times. The following is an example.

[After Annie's brief report, Walter asked for more information.]

Wa: How do you observe?

An: I'm noting down the time, when the person comes home. Well, since this is my family, I note down the time they are coming home. (???)

Wa: What time they are coming home? [laughing]

An: Then you note down like . . . on there I note down like the quality of the conversation, what topic.

These statements probably were not as helpful to the authors as those in sessions A and B. In this session, the authors were simply telling (instead of reading from their drafts) the responders what the latter did not know, rather than using the responders as a sounding board to find out whether their analyses were effectively written.

(2) Statements of challenge or suggestion

In all of the sessions, the second most frequent type of statement was the responders' challenge or suggestion. There were five challenges in session A, three by Annie and two by

Jack, and all of them appeared to be productive. In the following example, Annie challenged the coherence of Jack's writing and the completeness of his theory. Her questioning was effective since it made Jack aware that his theory about dating was incoherent, as well as incomplete because he had excluded homosexuals.

An: That last part about dating . . . [challenging coherence]
Ja: I started changing my ideas. I was using that as an example. Because_ See women wanted to be treated as equals, but then they wanted to be treated like women too. Like I mean a gentleman has to open the door. You know what I mean? See that was an incomplete idea. I decided not to build a theory on it. I used that as an example. You know and then . . . [laughing] But other than that . . . What about the assumptions? Were they Okay?
An: I guess you were ignoring gay people [challenging completeness of theory].
Ja: Yeah.
An: They are like_ abnormal.
Ja: I was trying to say an average American family. Yeah. I mean that . . . what'd your picture of an average American family look like and . . .

In session B, there were three challenges on the observation methods, of which the two by Judy and Jack appeared to be beneficial for revision while the one by Annie seemed less so. There was also one suggestion from Jack, which seemed helpful. As shown in the following excerpt, Judy's challenge of Annie's research methods could be considered productive because it highlighted the question of whether interviews were allowed by the professor as a means of data collection. Jack's challenge of Annie's method also turned into a pertinent discussion of the relative advantages and disadvantages of collecting data through observation versus by interview. Jack's suggestion of increasing the number of subjects was also valuable since it would enhance the validity of Annie's study.

[After Annie read her methods, which involved both observing and interviewing a subject. Previously the professor had specified that only observation was allowed.]
Ju: It's not only observation, it . . . [challenging]
Ja: (???) are not the same thing. In observation [slip of the tongue, meaning to say interview] they could like_ oh well they may not give you the whole thing. They might try to take their side.
Ju: What about in an interview?
Ja: [Suddenly aware of mistake] I am always making an error. Give me (???) I can see that's good. Maybe you can add different_ different children. [Since Annie had only one

subject, Jack suggested adding subjects.] That might be interesting. The same family_ [laughing] same . . .?

However, the challenge by Annie might be unproductive in that she asked Judy a question about the latter's methods but, after failing to get a satisfactory answer, did not pursue her point further.

In session C, of the four challenges produced, two were valid comments on factors the author should consider when interpreting data. One of these comments was made by Walter. This comment was valid and might lead Annie to explain her data more in her paper to clarify her theory. The other valid challenge, made by Greg, follows. Greg reminded Annie that objectivity is important in observation. This comment was very helpful since it pointed out that Annie might be subjective when she tried to observe herself as a subject. However, the suggestion was not elaborated on.

[After Annie's report about her observation]
An: I'm observing myself.
Gr: You are!
An: I'm one of the child there. Anyway somehow it's true because you have to watch someone else too.
Gr: You have to be objective about yourself [brief. suggestion].

The other two challenges were of a teasing nature and it is hard to say whether they were of value to the author. Such challenges may have been a way for students to keep the atmosphere lively and their relationship harmonious.

In general, the statements made in session A seemed to be more elaborate than those in session B, which in turn were more elaborate than those in session C. The statements in session C appeared to be less beneficial for revision, and the number of productive comments was also fewer.

(3) Evaluative statements

Evaluative statements were the third most frequent in session A and the least frequent in sessions B and C. There were three evaluative comments in session A, and they were extremely brief and perhaps not specific enough to be of value for revision. These comments seemed more like expressions of politeness from the responders, acknowledging that they heard the theory, rather than statements of assessment. The following example contains evaluative statements by Peggy and Jack regarding Annie's theory.

Pe: I think that was a good theory [laughing] [non-specific statement]. I think about that about . . . friends.

[laughing]
An: [Reading from the professor's handout] Are the assumptions reasonable? The assumption was that the parents would provide if they care about it. I guess if the parents . . . and that . . .
Ja: Well, bringing up?
An: Well, bringing up without (???)
Ja: That was kinda . . . kinda like_ well_ [laughing] I guess we could infer. But anyhow . . . seems reasonable enough to understand [general evaluative comment].

In session B, there were only two evaluative comments produced; they were either very brief or incomplete and probably not helpful for revision, either. In session C, the two evaluative statements produced were also very brief and general. One of these shows Walter evaluating Annie's study:

Gr: So so far do you think your theory is right?
An: Yeah, so far.
Wa: Looks good [general evaluative statement].

The evaluative statements made in all three sessions appeared to be sweeping generalizations intended to show courtesy or produce good feelings in the group. This may indicate the students' inability or reluctance to judge their peers' writing.

(4) Procedural statements

Procedural statements were the least frequent type of statement in session A and the second least frequent in sessions B and C. Such statements served to keep the discussion moving forward. The following is an example from session A showing Jack urging Annie to read.

[At the beginning of the session]
Ja: Why don't you go first, Annie? We nominate you.

The data from these four statements show that restatements of the author's ideas comprised a large part of the peer response sessions--almost half of sessions A and C and close to two-thirds of session B. A positive interpretation of this is that the students were able to use these statements and have their group function as a sounding board; they could find out whether their own texts were effectively written or whether they understood correctly what the other authors wrote. However, a negative interpretation also applies. The restating routine may have often occurred because the audience did not listen carefully or did not have as much time as the authors to linger over the texts. In this sense, the restatements gave the responders opportunities to catch missing information. However, responders failed to reflect back to the authors whether their writing was effective. The authors might thus benefit very little from such

restatements.

Statements of challenge or suggestion are, by logic, the most valuable type of comments since they offer advice for revision. However, these statements comprised only about one-third of sessions A and C, and close to one-fourth of session B. All of the five challenges made in session A were quite valid and presumably valuable for the authors' construction of social theories. Three of the four challenges or suggestions in session B were potentially helpful to the authors' modification of their data collection methods. Two of the four statements in session C also seemed valuable for interpreting data. These instances of challenge and suggestion show that the students occasionally did have the ability to ask valid questions, however, the percentages of such statements are small. This would indicate that the students still needed training in analyzing problems critically.

Evaluative statements, which comprised only a small percentage of the discussion in all of the sessions, were often very brief and simply offered general praise of the writing; they were likely of little value for revision. The students rarely made assessments that demonstrated careful analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the writing. This may suggest either the students' reluctance to offer criticism, which is perhaps a sign of their misconception about their role in the group, or their inability to critique their peers' work.

Even though the amount of time allotted for each of the peer response sessions was the same, session A (15 mins.) lasted longer than either session B (10 mins.) or C (7 mins.). The students responded more to the theories of family conflicts than to the research methods or the data analyses. In fact, a striking characteristic of the verbal exchanges in sessions B and C was the scarcity of comments. In these two sessions, the students spent most of the time on reading drafts and very little on discussing methods or data analyses. The quality of the statements made in session A was also better than that of statements in sessions B and C, as is evidenced by the less specific or elaborate statements of challenge and suggestion offered in sessions B and C. This may be explained by the likelihood that the students had been previously exposed to some sociological theories or had some knowledge about family conflicts on a common sense level, whereas they had had little exposure to research methods or data analysis.

The students' preparation for the peer response sessions was an important factor that affected their performance. This is suggested by the better quality of the group interaction in sessions A and B, when all the students had brought their drafts with them, as compared with their performance in session C, when none of them had their draft.

Consensus Exercise

In the consensus exercise, the students tried to rank ten factors that contribute to an editor's successful revision of another writer's work. The ten factors are as follows: (a) knowledge of the subject; (b) a good ear for language; (c) knowledge of the rules of grammar; (d) experience reading a lot of different writing; (e) confidence in one's judgement; (f) the ability to remember what one has read, (g) the ability to concentrate, (h) the ability to adopt the role of other readers; (i) a large vocabulary; and (j) a good imagination for alternative expression. Ranking #1 means contributing most and #10 contributing least. Consensus was defined by the professor as substantial agreement, not necessarily unanimity. The students were not allowed to average the individual ranks, nor would they use majority vote rule, or "horse trade" with each other.

An analysis of the group interaction shows the following characteristics. These characteristics are presented in the order of the frequency in which they appear, with the most frequent one presented first. (In the excerpts, "Ba" refers to a student, Barbara, "Ss" means several students, and "S?" means an unidentified student.)

(1) Insufficient presentation of arguments, little negotiation of ideas, and frequent resort to majority vote rule.

The students demonstrated very little negotiation skills. They often failed to present their arguments with sufficient support, and most of the students also failed to challenge others' ideas. The following is an example.

01 Ba: Why do you think it's [referring to grammar] important?
02 Pe: Because a lot of the things you do in their writing
03 are grammatical, I mean, yeah, structurally [briefly
04 responding to Barbara's challenge].
05 Ss: (???) [Ss speaking simultaneously]
06 Pe: The content . . . and the grammar [laughing]. I am
07 not saying that only grammar is important, but . . .
08 [failing to support argument]
09 An: Actually not the same. Like we are doing college
10 level writing. You think you would know the rules of
11 grammar already [briefly challenging Peggy's statement].
12 Ba: (??) content (???) Grammar is not that important.
13 Sorry [whole group laughing] [failing to support
14 argument].

The above shows that in lines 6-7 and 12-13, Peggy and Barbara presented their opinions without elaborating. Even though on

occasions some students did substantiate their arguments with support, as indicated in lines 2-3 and 9-11, these occasions were rare and the supporting statements were brief.

Equipped with few negotiation skills, the students resorted to majority vote seven times to complete the task, in violation of the professor's rule. The voting often took place after a student stated briefly what he/she thought of a certain item or simply proposed a ranking for a certain item. The following is an example.

Wa: [Switching topic] What do you guys have for 10? [Ss laughing]
S?: A.
S?: A.
S?: B [shrieking laughter from Ss].
Pe: I was going to laugh at . . . [laughing] I put G.
Wa: G.
Pe: Being able to concentrate.
An: G?
S?: I think they were wrong.
Wa: We'll change all these numbers to 5 [laughing].
S?: This says we're one number, are we? Ah, let's see.
S?: [Switching to a new item] Hey, whatever we put for 2_
S?: A.
S?: B.
S?: B.
S?: H [Ss laughing].

Very often the voting did not help the students to complete the task. Frequently, the voting showed very different opinions and failed to produce a consensus, therefore the students switched to a new item, as seen above. Out of a total of seven votes, switching occurred in five.

Quite often, some members laughed at their methods of reaching consensus, which showed awareness that they were not following their professor's instructions. Toward the end of the exercise, the students' conversation gave the impression that they were tired of negotiating and were willing to take suggestions from anybody who still had energy to offer any. There was very little presentation of arguments. Sometimes a student disagreed with another's proposition but failed to produce a satisfactory one him/herself. Sometimes two students disagreed with each other's ranking and at the end accepted one from a third student, with no negotiation of ideas among them at all. The following is an example.

Wa: [Talking about an item not on the ranking list] I think ideas should be placed in certain places though. Doesn't matter how it is said. But the ideas are logical.

Pe: Which one of these is that? Which one did you say is that? We'll put that one first [willing to accept any proposition].
Wa: (???)
S?: 2 or 3?
S?: So which one?
S?: Yeah.
S?: I don't think it has to be . . . but I don't know what else we could put . . . [failing to challenge with a good proposition]
Wa: Okay. [Switching to item C] C for number 3?
Je: No [shrieking in protest but providing no reason for disagreeing].
S?: 2 [presenting no supporting statement].
Je: Okay [compromising].

At the end of the session, after the professor announced that the students had five minutes to complete the exercise, they took even less time to negotiate. In fact, they filled the rest of the blanks on their list with almost any suggestion from any member.

(2) Switching to a new item after failing to reach agreement

When the students failed to agree on which ranking to assign a certain item, they tended to switch to another item. Such switching occurred 10 times. The following is an example.

[While some students were discussing the editor's need to have knowledge of the subject of writing, Jennifer switched to item C, knowledge of the rules of grammar.]
S?: Somebody else has knowledge of the subject.
An: Who should be able to? You as the reviser?
S?: Yeah, meaning that you're . . .
An: Oh [understanding].
Je: [Switching to a new item] Any C's for number 1? [laughing] [Ss talking simultaneously]
Je: You're still . . .

(3) Frequent silence

Frequently, there were long pauses where the students did not know how to proceed. Sometimes these long pauses were preceded or followed by the murmuring of some students, which might indicate their confusion or frustration.

(4) A felt need to maintain a harmonious atmosphere in the group

Several members hesitated to challenge other students' arguments, perhaps to avoid offending others, as shown in the following.

Pe: I am not saying that only grammar is important, but . . . [failing to challenge].
S: Grammar is not that important. Sorry [laughing].

(5) Anxiousness to finish the task; rejoicing at completion of the task

The students shrieked and laughed when they completed a part of the task, indicating that they could not wait to finish the exercise. This occurred twice--first, when the group agreed for the first time on which item to rank as last; and second, when the whole task was finished. The second is exemplified below.

S?: Okay. [Reading her ranking list] B C F G E [Ss laughing, then a long pause]
S?: Okay.
S?: [Asking for other propositions] Are there_ [a pause]
S?: [Asking for Sherry's opinion] Sherry?
[No response from Sherry]
Ss: OOOh!!! [rejoicing] Okay, G E F.
S?: G E F.
Ss: C G E.
S?: E.
Ss: F. Ohhhhhhh! [rejoicing]

(6) Clarifying unclear phrases in the professor's handout.during the discussion

On four occasions in the discussion, the students took the opportunity to clarify the meaning of certain words or phrases in the handout, as exemplified below.

An: The directions. . . I still don't understand the directions.
Je: It says rank these in the order that you think is important in revising someone else'_
An: Oh oh. Okay.

The data from the consensus exercise show that the students apparently lacked the critical thinking skills required to analyze problems and synthesize ideas from various sources to reach a consensus. This is suggested by their failure to present arguments with adequate support. They were also unfamiliar with the procedures for conducting a consensus exercise, as seen in their frequent resort to voting and switching from one part of the task to another. They failed to present their own arguments and evaluate those of others carefully before making decisions about ranking. It was apparent that the students needed to be taught how to begin, sustain, and close an argument. The scarcity of challenges that occurred during the exercise may also imply the students' deficiency in their metalanguage about composing and revising. The students' hesitation in

contradicting others demonstrated a misconception about their roles in the group, as also shown in Danis' study (1982) of college students (who were reluctant to offer negative criticism). They might not have understood that their role was to help their peers view things from new angles and that one way of doing this was to disagree. The frequent silences suggested the students' inability to negotiate, and the occasional rejoicing at the completion of a part of the task showed their eagerness to terminate the exercise. The brainstorming and negotiation which was supposed to occur through the presentation of pros and cons was never realized, contrary to the professor's hopes.

It is interesting to see that the students experienced much greater success with peer response than with the consensus exercise. The skills the students exhibited in the former (even though there was room for improvement) did not transfer well to the latter. Perhaps this was because the two tasks were somewhat different. Even though both required the ability to analyze problems, substantiate arguments by providing support, and negotiate with peers, the latter seemed to require more skills in negotiation. Since the students had had more practice with peer response, it is not surprising that in this activity they performed better.

Conclusions

An examination of the peer response sessions shows that the students were better able to restate their peers' ideas than to challenge these ideas or make suggestions for revision. Even though the challenges and suggestions made were often valid, the students did not make them often enough. Evaluative statements rarely occurred and were often general expressions of praise, and therefore not particularly helpful for revision. Also the students were more capable of responding to social theories than to data collection methods or data analyses.

The students' performance in both the peer response sessions and consensus exercise showed their lack of critical thinking skills required in analyzing and solving problems and synthesizing ideas. This is suggested by the small number of challenges, suggestions, and evaluative statements during the peer response sessions and by the students' inability to present arguments with adequate support in the consensus exercise.

In both activities, the students displayed some discomfort with their responsibility to critique, challenge, and negotiate. This was particularly true with the consensus exercise. At the peer response sessions, the students felt uneasy about questioning or evaluating their peers' writing. In the consensus exercise, the students failed to argue their points or negotiate with others. Their hesitation in presenting counter-arguments

(Danis, 1982; Davies & Omberg, 1987) and apologetic feelings about disagreeing with others led to a certain degree of ineffectiveness in both activities.

The students were apparently very inexperienced with the "genre" of consensus exercise. Their failure to reach agreement on one item at a time before proceeding to the next and their constant resort to voting prevented them from effectively completing the exercise. The lack of a metalanguage for discussing revision may have also caused many silent moments during the discussion. It requires many skills and much training for students to do a consensus exercise successfully.

The student's lack of preparation for group work may also jeopardized their performance. In the case of the third peer response session, failure to finish the required work before class and have a draft ready for sharing made the session much less productive than desired.

Implications for Teaching and Research

The results show that the students did not have sufficient skills to analyze writing problems, make useful challenges, or suggest revisions at peer response sessions. They need to develop critical thinking skills. This could be done through teacher modeling, perhaps in the form of the teacher's written feedback or teacher-student conferences about the students' writing. The students should also be taught to present arguments effectively by providing sufficient support. Group self evaluation strategies could be used at the end of each peer response session for the students to understand their difficulties.

The data indicate that much of the time in the peer response group was taken up by the students reading drafts and clarifying their content. Time could have been used more economically if the students had read the drafts and taken extensive notes before the session. This would have allowed more time for the peer evaluators to point out writing problems and suggest revisions.

Students should be educated about their role in a peer response group. They should be informed that revision can be successfully facilitated by a peer response group and that their role in the group is to respond to writing critically in order to help their peers see the strengths and weaknesses of their writing, not merely to be polite. The teacher's modeling of how to respond to writing would again be helpful.

Since the students in this study seemed to be better able to respond to social theories than to research methods or data analyses, teachers should devote more time to the discussion of the latter two.

Students doing a consensus exercise should be taught not only critical thinking skills, like those required in peer response sessions, but also effective procedures for approaching the task. They should be instructed to negotiate with others, not to shy away from presenting their views. They should learn how to begin and end an argument, instead of randomly skipping from one part of the discussion to another or simply taking a vote when at an impasse. Modeling can also be provided. In addition, through modeling, the instructor can teach the metalanguage required in the discussion of composing and revising. The teacher should also be aware that the skills students develop at peer response sessions do not transfer easily to consensus tasks. For each task that is somewhat different, training is needed.

This study did not examine the revisions made by the students or investigate the effects of peer response. In future research, efforts should be made to assess the effects of different types of comments by examining the revisions that have actually been made and the quality of these revisions. Students could also be interviewed to determine their reaction toward each type of comment. In future studies on consensus exercises, for the purpose of triangulation, students can be interviewed to identify the effective and ineffective strategies they use in completing such a task.

This study has attempted to shed light on the nature of the verbal exchanges that writing groups produce and the processes they undergo. However, it has its limitations. Since the researcher always selected the group that included one of the subjects (Annie), this subject might have been a factor in influencing the results. In future research, subjects could be randomly selected and their number also enlarged to enhance validity.

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